

## A Translation into English of Khalil I. Al-Fuzai's<sup>1</sup> "In the Café"<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

One of the principles of the Islamic faith is belief in destiny; "that Allah has power over all things and that Allah surrounds all things in (His) knowledge" (Al-Hilali 768). A human being does not have knowledge of his/her predestination, and thus acts in accordance with a choice and/or a desire from within him. Yet some people in the Saudi Arabian society blame destiny for their idleness as if fate were their problem. They should not attribute their laziness to destiny because Islam requires people to work, and their fate is unknown to them before it takes place. This story portrays how luck or fate can play an important role in the life of some people. The protagonist goes to the café to spend time and drink some coffee. There he gets acquainted with his rich uncle, who had left the village. While introducing the story setting, the author uses such words as "routine," "mechanical," "dull," "gloom," "boring," etc.—words that reflect the protagonist's state of mind, and how he envisions his life; it is a difficult and miserable life. Though he apparently goes to the café for a change of pace from the dull atmosphere at home, boredom follows him everywhere. Yousef is "alone to face the hardships of life..."; even in the café, he is alienated. So he wishes to marry, because a wife, as a partner, would support him, at least emotionally; but he questions "how can [I] afford marriage expenses?" in a society where marriage requires wealth. He is no different from other main characters in this collection who are struggling to earn a living. Like Hassan, the protagonist of "Before the Station," Yousef in this story assumes his late father's responsibilities; he should "make a living for his mother and his two little brothers..."<sup>3</sup> The Saudi Arabian society expects the elder son to take care of the family if something bad happens to the father and, at the same time; it rarely provides any support for such families. Hence, Yousef should "become a sailor" who will face the "tyrannical cruelty" of the sea that delivered the deathblow to his father. He has no idea that his life will end up with such a struggle. It is Um-Kalthoom, a famous Arabian singer, whose songs give him momentum to struggle for survival. To him, she creates "an immortal melody" about pain and suffering—"a pleasant song chanted by sad people" like him. And as long as she manages to mold pain into "a pleasant song" between her lips, he has a chance to create a good life for his family out of the hardships he is facing through his daily struggle. Indeed, "a new dawn in [Yousef's] life" emerges after a lengthy night, and his fall changes into spring. While he is sitting in the café, a coincidence takes place: an old, rich man appears, looking for his nephew who, in the end, turns out to be Yousef himself. As is the case in "A Point of Change," the author depicts in this story difficulties of living, and how chance or fate, as people there call it, may change one's life.<sup>4</sup>

**Keywords:** Khalil al-Fuzai, Saudi, short story, "The Cafe".

### Translation

And he sits on a bench at the café built on the corner of a four-way crossroads; one of those ways goes from east to west, and the other from north to south . . . while people move back and forth in front of him in a routine, mechanical way . . . dull expressions on their faces . . . and the stubborn gloom that marks all faces with a sign of inactivity, and those people spread around him on the benches like ants . . . and the boring routine of their

hands' movements when their tea cups move toward their mouths.

I wonder . . . which foolish ideas occupy their minds?  
"Welcome . . . what would you like to drink, sir?"

Yousef attends to the voice of the waiter, who starts cleaning the table before him, waiting to hear what he will say. Then it is enough to him to say, "Tea."

And his eyes follow the short waiter until he disappears into the small room so as to bring the tea, but he allows for his gaze to penetrate the walls of the small room and

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extend to the furthest north . . . there, where the sea lies with no choice . . . leaving the city to kneel under its feet in a desperate surrender . . . the sea holds land secrets in its big womb . . . and hides tyrannical cruelty behind its dubious calm . . . the sea put an end to the life of his father, the sailor . . . leaving him alone to face the hardships of life . . . working to make a living for his mother and his two little brothers . . . life is not as he wanted it . . . and the luxury he dreamt of ended up with the death of his father; he has no other choice but to take his father's place and become a sailor . . . he learned the profession by accompanying his father on days when the weather was good.

"Here you are," says the waiter, putting the tea cup on the small tray before him, and he brings the cup close to his mouth so as to taste the tea, yet its heat makes him spit out the sip impatiently, damning covertly the tea and the one who brought it.

A dull laugh comes from one of the benches, but he does not bother turning around to see the person who must have noticed him tasting and spitting out the tea, and he indignantly feels the contraction of his face muscles against the uncouth person who is laughing at him, but who is to say that person is laughing at him?

The cup is still held between the table and his mouth, and his hand is vigorously gripping the cup to the point of feeling some pain; then he sets the cup on the small tray, and lets his hands rest on the table, and his feet are stiffly stretching before him . . . they are about to plunge into the café's ground.

Um-Kalthoom's voice arises from the radio of the café . . . how great you are, Um-Kalthoom! . . . pain between your lips turns into an immortal melody that becomes deeply fathomless . . . and pain between your lips becomes a pleasant song chanted by sad hearts, conflicted by humankind's eternal struggle for existence with life's hardships.

What a miracle you are, Um-Kalthoom!

His mind jumps to the house where his mother and his two little brothers await him . . . he has become accustomed to sitting in this café . . . and on the chair his father used to sit on . . . and why not?

He inherited everything from his father . . . his profession . . . his responsibility toward his family . . . his habits . . . even his love of Um-Kalthoom's voice . . . mercy be upon you oh late one . . . is it painful to leave before your time? . . . I wish you could feel the rift that appeared in our lives after your death . . . but it would make no difference!

Because you have already moved to a different world

An old man, sitting not far from him, continuously coughs so that his thin body shakes in a manner comical yet pathetic at the same time . . . the old man's appearance gives the impression of being rich. His eyes slide toward another man sitting beside the old man; the man is busy playing with a child that seems to be his son; then he cleans his mouth with a handkerchief, saying, "Learn cleanliness, O my son."

The man pronounced his last word in a simple, lovely way, so that he wishes to hear it again, and he thinks the man will not refuse to repeat it if he requests so from him, yet the old man interrupts, saying, "Cleanliness is part of faith . . . he should learn from this moment."

How great to have a child to take care of; rather how great to have a wife to share with him all his pain! How . . . he wishes to marry, but the castle is so high that he cannot pass through, and the sea is so deep that he cannot get to its bottom . . . marriage is as far from his reach as the ground is from the Pleiades. To think of buying a new boat he does not have money for is much easier than to think of marriage. Hence all those whom he knows, and even those whom he does not know who are living at the same economic level, are not supposed to think of marriage.

And he sips from the tea cup which has been put in front of him, and which begins to lose its heat forever . . . and when he sets the cup on its small tray, it makes a sound the old man, the man, and the child hear; they all simultaneously turn toward it . . . there is no doubt this man is happy with his wife and child . . . how great marital life is . . . including happiness, warmth, kindness and compassion, even if some troubles intervene; those troubles are flavorful . . . necessary . . . like water for barren soil . . . like medicine for patients . . . but how can he afford marriage expenses? He owns nothing; how can he marry? . . . he is creeping toward his fourth decade . . . and despite this fact he is not able to marry, and who knows? He may live his whole life without a wife . . . without a harbor, where the ship of his life, with which waves of events still play, may anchor.

The old man who looks rich speaks, as if he wants to continue on a certain topic, "If I only knew his fate after his father's death!"

The other man says, "I wish you could describe him more . . . I might know him. I know almost all the sailors here." The old man with a rich appearance seems excited when he says, "I cannot describe him because I have never met him . . . all I know about him is some information that may not be correct . . . I heard it after I heard about his father's death."

And a fit of coughing overcomes him before he can continue talking.

"I believe his father left him with two little brothers . . . and his mother, I think, is still alive. Can you name for me some sailors whom you know?"

The matter of this old man who appears rich is peculiar . . . he is talking about a family like his family. And Yousef listens to the man digress, mentioning the names of some sailors whom he knows . . . leaning his elbow on a table in front of him, while the other hand plays with the child's hair . . . this man . . . he knows him from his face . . . he has met him more than once, particularly in this café, but he has never tried to talk with him . . . he wishes he had. The old man says, "No . . . No . . . None of these."

And he sips the last drop from the tea cup, but he just about chokes on it when he hears the old man continue, saying, "Mercy be upon you, O Ahmed . . . I wish I had been here before your death so as to know your son, because my wealth should go to him."

He says his last words as if he were talking to himself.

The old seemingly-rich man mentioned his father's name . . . what a coincidence! And what does this man want from his father? But who knows whether the old man means his father in person? There are many people who have the same characteristics:

Name: Ahmed.

Family: Son and his two brothers and their mother.

This describes his family . . . and this is the topic the old man has talked about from the time Yousef started enjoying listening to him. Is this old man who seems rich his uncle whom his father talked about frequently, and who left the city before Yousef's birth, and whose news ceased since then?

And when he notices the old man preparing to leave, he thinks of approaching and talking with him.

"I am your uncle, O Yousef," the old man concludes after talking with Yousef, who has told him, in turn, his name, his family's name, and who died and who is alive.

Each hugs the other eagerly.

Dewdrops fall upon the flower of Yousef's life, reviving it, and permitting the emergence of a new dawn in a life whose night had lengthened until Yousef thought that it was a permanent night, without end.

#### Translator's Notes

1. Khalil I. AL-Fuzai (1940-) is a literary writer from Saudi Arabia. In his writings, he introduced his culture, addressing many social, cultural, and religious issues he saw in his society.
2. This story was translated from the following Arabic source:  
Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. Thursday Fair. (سوق الخميس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 59-66.
3. Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text
4. An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.

#### Author's Profile



Gassim H. Dohal is an Associate Professor of English from Saudi Arabia. He holds an MA from Ball State University, USA, and a PhD from Indiana University of PA, USA. He has contributed research papers and articles in different academic journals. Also, he has translated some literary works.